

Fake News, Crowdsourcing and Media Outlets in Greece: Is News Credibility a Matter of Professionalism?

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Abstract

Traditionally journalism is a key function for democracy. News used to be produced by professional journalists and the term "gatekeeper", used to describe a journalist's main task, filtering information, and when and how reliable news should be provided. However, users can now choose to get the information they want from many online sources, websites most of which are free and social media. Citizens of the digital era have plenty of opportunities not only to access information such as news but also to produce, share or criticize such information, whose credibility is not always confirmed. This led to the beginning of the participatory journalism era where crowdsourcing techniques such as crowd wisdom (commenting on news media websites articles or on social media pages) play a significant role in the public sphere. However, crowdsourcing, social media sources, and citizen journalism are often criticized as a key fake news generator while traditional journalism outlets seem more credible. This paper studies the fake news phenomenon in Greece using the walk-through method and statistical analysis for the most popular Greek news websites exploring the confirmed cases of fake news revealed by the Facebook certified fact-checking website "Ellinika Hoaxes". The findings of the study chart Greek media landscape characteristics and reveal new perspectives for traditional journalism, crowdsourcing, and news distribution outlets' credibility.

Keywords: Fake News, Crowdsourcing, Journalism, Fact-Checking

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Introduction

Professional journalism used to be the key guardian of information and truth in the public sphere. Media and journalists used to deliver news and to inform in contrast to rumors that most of the time were proved as untrustworthy. Although the term “fake news” is not new, contemporary discourse, particularly media coverage, seems to define fake news as referring to viral posts based on fictitious accounts on the web made to look like news reports. A recent study defined fake news “to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Edson et al., 2017). “Fake news” is fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media’s editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information (Lazer et al., 2018). There are plenty of definitions of fake news that refer to the term as information that looks like news but it is not. This dissertation has not the intention to redefine the terms fake news and misinformation but to research the ways and methods that can be used to fight and limit the phenomenon and reveal where it appears.

Very few research attempts have been conducted in Greece on fake news and strategies to confine its influence in the public sphere. Crowdsourcing is a fact-checking strategy that gives society (the crowd) the opportunity to participate in the journalistic process and to propose which information has to be double-checked or to help during the procedure. “Ellinika Hoaxes” is a fact-checking platform using crowdsourcing strategies used as a reference by this dissertation to reveal the presence of fake news in the Greek public sphere.

Literature review

Fake news is now viewed as one of the greatest threats to democracy, journalism, and freedom of expression. It has weakened public trust in governments and its potential impact on the contentious “Brexit” referendum and the equally divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election – which it might have affected – is yet to be realized. The reach of fake news was best highlighted during the critical months of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, where the top twenty frequently-discussed fake election stories generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook, ironically, larger than the total of 7,367,000 for the top twenty most-discussed election stories posted by 19 major news websites (Zhou & Zafarani, 2020).

Treating news media as sources of testimonial beliefs emphasizes a central role they play in citizens' lives: serving as the source of much of what we take ourselves to know. Without reliance on curated news reports, people would know little about what goes on in other countries, about the world of politics, or even about what the latest sports results are. Of course, communicating reliable information to their readership or viewership is not their only social function. For one, commercial news sources need to return a profit to their proprietors, and even individual consumers do not always turn to the news for knowledge and information only, but may also hope for some entertainment and diversion (Gelfert, 2018).

Facts, truth, and reality are according to Zelizer (2004) the “god terms” in journalism. As a profession, journalists have established their jurisdictional authority to claim them.

The discipline of verification is at the core of this structural claim to the statement of authority, setting journalism apart from other forms of communication.

Nevertheless, the acceleration of the news cycle and proliferation of news and information has raised concerns about the erosion of the discipline of verification, and by implication, the professional legitimacy of journalism (Hermida, 2012).

According to Hassan et al. (2015), fact-checking is difficult and time-consuming for journalists. What is most of the time obvious is that more resources are needed [...].

Fact-checking requires advanced research techniques. While ordinary journalism can rely on simple “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” quotations, a fact-check requires more thorough research so the journalist can determine the accuracy of a claim[...].

We should not be surprised if we can get very close but never reach the “Holy Grail”: A fully automated fact-checker calls for fundamental breakthroughs in multiple fronts and, eventually, it represents a form of Artificial Intelligence.

In the US and Europe, different types of fact-checkers have emerged. According to Humprecht (2019), Graves and Cherubini (2016) generally distinguish two models of fact-checkers, namely, the ‘newsroom model’ and the ‘NGO model’. The newsroom model contains fact-checking organizations affiliated with an established media company. Although only a minority of fact-checkers in Europe belong to this model, these fact-checkers often have a wide reach (Graves and Cherubini 2016). In Germany, for example, the public broadcaster ARD operates its own fact-checking website. The NGO model, in contrast, involves fact-checkers that operate independently of traditional newsrooms. Those organizations are free of the editorial and business constraints of established media outlets but lack the editorial resources and reliable audiences. However, some of these organizations have managed to establish themselves in national media markets. Those outlets are completely independent, are projects of established NGOs, or are linked to universities. (Humprecht, 2019). Such a case is the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform which is funded only from Facebook due to its high performance in detecting non-true stories (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019).

Crowdsourcing as a fact-checking strategy

Crowdsourcing is not a brand new term. Jeff Howe proposed in June 2006 for the first time the term crowdsourcing by combining the terms crowd and outsourcing. Howe explains that the evolution of technology has led to a marked reduction in the distance between professionals and amateurs (Howe, 2008; Howe, 2006).

A suggested definition is: "Crowdsourcing is a form of collective online activity in which a person or an institution or a nonprofit organization or a company proposes, through an open invitation, to voluntarily take up a job. In taking up work the crowd must engage in personal work or money or knowledge or experience, and always involves mutual benefit to both sides. Users are satisfied with their needs, and the developer of the initiative acquires and uses for the benefit of the user what the user has contributed to the task, which depends on the activity undertaken by the user"(Estellés-Arolas, & Ladron-de-Guevara, 2012). Jeff Howe has distinguished four types of

strategies for crowdsourcing: Crowdfunding (fundraising), Crowd creation, (the crowd creates, Crowdvoting (collective vote), Crowdwisdom (collective intelligence).

The term has many uses and can be found in lots of different activities.

Crowdsourcing in Journalism is defined as an invitation for the crowd to participate in the journalistic processes in various ways, by submitting knowledge, sharing opinions, or sending photos (Antonopoulos et al., 2020).

According to Aitamurto (2015), crowdsourcing in journalism resulted in efficient knowledge search and discovery in all the cases. In several cases, the crowd provides leads and tips that the journalists wouldn't most likely have discovered otherwise.

Fake news in Greece

Misinformation and fake news on Greek media, social media, and the Internet is also not a new phenomenon. According to Mavridis (2018) in her recent study about propaganda on Greek media, Patrona (2018) mentions the historical framework of the Greek case and emphasizes the fact that in the Greek public sphere there have always been misleading information, false facts, and fake news coming from the media of all types. Furthermore, in the same study, Mavridis mentions that researchers Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) through their study on the economic crisis of 2010 and its impact on media refer cases where significant Greek media outlets displayed fake news and misleading information. By analyzing the discourse of the most prominent Greek media, they conclude that popular and prominent Greek online newspapers, such as tanea.gr and enet.gr, made use of sentimental propagandistic methods and they generated misleading and fake news (Mavridis, 2018).

"Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform

"Ellinika Hoaxes" platform commenced in Greece as a blog 4 years ago, as an idea of Thodoris Daniilidis, investigating the news circulating on the Greek internet and highlighting those that are not true. Generally speaking Laura Bononcini, Director of Public Policy of Facebook in Southeast Europe, officially states on May 2, 2019, the beginning of a partnership with "Ellinika Hoaxes".

The platform does not produce original news stories and it is not a journalistic media outlet. It is merely a fact-checking website funded by Facebook, combining fact-checkers employment and crowdsourcing strategies in order to bust fake news that emerges in the Greek public sphere.

"Ellinika Hoaxes" uses a team of professional fact-checkers who run the fact-checking procedure based on information that comes from the crowd through an open call:

"Ellinika Hoaxes encourages readers to participate in the fight against fake news. For this reason, we are always open to suggestions, remarks, corrections, submission of topics for research, etc. Your participation through the submission of proposals is one of the basic rules for choosing our topics" (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019).

According to the platform's information, all major crowdsourcing strategies of Howe's are used (Crowd creation, Crowdvoting, Crowdwisdom except Crowdfunding).

The platform uses the following fact-checking procedure (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019):

The crowd proposes potential non-true stories and fake news cases through the "Ellinika Hoaxes" website or official Facebook page. Then, professional fact-checkers of the platform take action:

- Step 1: Potentially suspicious material is identified
- Step 2: Content analysis: The fact-checking team contacts initial sources
- Step 3: Audiovisual research: To make sure whether audiovisual material is really related to the article's allegations.
- Step 4: Examination of scientific studies in cases of pseudo-scientific claims.
- Step 5: Communication with other fact-checking groups/organizations

Scope of the study and methodology

This study aims to search whether and to what extent, news media outlets in Greece circulate fake news in the public sphere. The ongoing economic, political and social crisis has resulted in a dramatic loss of advertising revenue and other subsidies, while massive layoffs and precarious labor became the norm in the Greek press and media. At the same time, credibility and trust levels for the traditional media collapsed (80 percent for television, 65 percent for newspapers, rendering online news media brands the most trusted and read outlets (Saridou et al., 2017). Few research efforts have been conducted in Greece in order to demonstrate both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the origin of non-true stories.

In order to deal effectively with fake news, it is important to know more precisely where we will encounter it, but also which are the characteristics of the news websites that display fake news more often.

This dissertation uses quantitative & qualitative research in combination with the empirical walkthrough method. visiting the websites that displayed non-true stories (based on the Greek fact-checking website "Ellinika Hoaxes")

A comparison between different media outlets website categories such as portals/blogs and newspaper websites and TV-station websites and strategies is attempted in this paper. The study focuses on two pylons:

- a) monitoring and analyzing the characteristics of non-true stories confirmed by the Greek Facebook-approved fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" (website categories)
- b) Analyzing certain characteristic cases of non-true stories in the Greek public sphere. Researchers recorded all the non-true stories confirmed by the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform between 01/10/2019 and 31/12/2019 using the walkthrough method with the use of MS Excel software.

For the data collection, researchers visited the “Ellinika Hoaxes” platform daily in order to collect and analyze data.

Researchers distinguish 4 basic website categories:

- Portals/ Blogs
- Newspapers websites
- TV stations websites
- Facebook pages

The choice for the categorization has been made according to the separation between traditional professional media and new media in order to reveal where fake news and non-true stories circulate more often.

Though quantitative statistical analysis can reveal lots of useful information, researchers used also qualitative analysis in order to review four (4) severe cases of non-true stories confirmed by the fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" in traditional media and highlight the stories' background.

This was chosen due to the alleged “higher professionalism” of traditional media outlets and traditional journalism. The four cases confirmed by the fact-checking platform (all in high circulation traditional media outlets) concern severe incidents of misinformation and are highlighted through qualitative analysis due to the importance and magnitude of misinformation delivered.

Results

During a period of three months, (October to December 2019) the Facebook-approved fact-checking platform “Ellinika Hoaxes” confirmed 533 cases of all kinds, a quite impressive number of non-true stories and fake news diffused in the Greek public sphere.

Statistical analysis yielded quite interesting results.

A massive percentage (78%) of all non-true stories cases confirmed were spotted in portals/blogs while 8% was found in Facebook pages alone.

Nevertheless, there is a minor but not negligible percentage of 6% found in traditional newspaper websites, and another 2% found on TV station websites. We have to mention here that another 6% of cases were not finally totally confirmed as fake news although that high suspicions remain. This is the reason this percentage is absent from table 1:

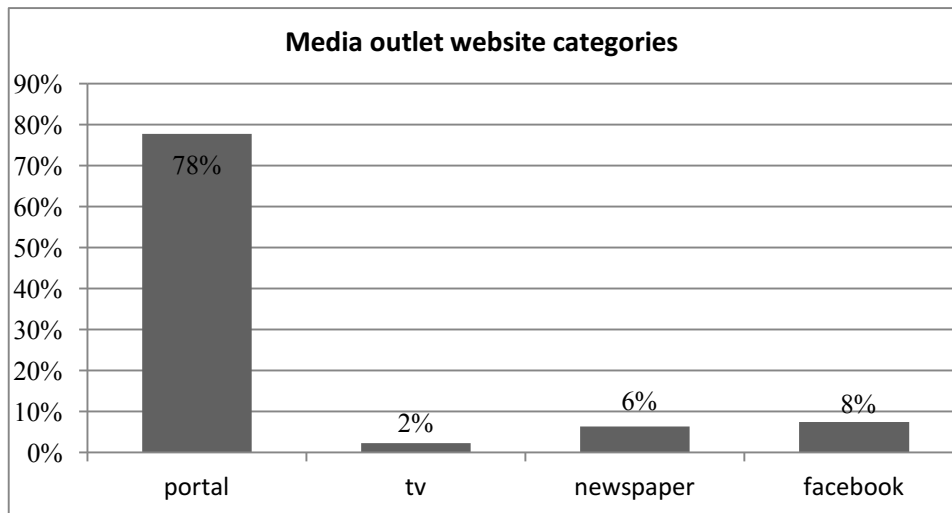


Table 1: Confirmed fake news per media outlet category in Greece

The results of the study imply that traditional media retain their gate-keeping journalistic role, publishing a substantially lower percentage of non-true stories.

We can assume that professional journalists employed in traditional media are less vulnerable -or willing- to reproduce non-true stories.

Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis yielded a much different perspective. Through the walkthrough method, researchers came across 4 severe cases of non-true stories in traditional professional media outlets:

Case 1

This confirmed non-true story was published by “Ta Nea” news website one of the most historical and significant Greek newspapers:

“Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama criticized Europe for not helping enough Albania in dealing with the enormous problems caused by the deadly 6.4 magnitude earthquake. Instead, he praised Turkey and its President Recep Tayyip Erdogan”.



Figure1: Qualitative analysis, Case 1

This case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns international affairs, foreign policy, and diplomacy. Such cases of misinformation in foreign policy can have devastating consequences.

Case 2

This confirmed non-true story was published in the website of “Naftemporiki” the most well known and respected Greek financial newspaper:

“The inhabitants of Messolongi a small but historic Greek town found themselves in front of a horrible and brutal spectacle on Saturday, when they located a stray dog, from which the eyes had been removed. The unfortunate animal was found dead by residents of the area, who are asking - according to the website "agrinosite.gr" - to locate and arrest the "murderer and torturer”.

naftemporiki.gr N-studio N-εκπαίδευση N-conferences CLICKATLIFE f e i y in

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ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ

Έβγαλαν τα μάτια από αδέσποτο σκυλί στο Μεσολόγγι

Κυριακή, 17 Νοεμβρίου 2019 14:55 • UPD: 15:00



✉ 📄 A-A+A+ 👍 Like 2 📄 Share

Ενώπιον ενός φρικτού και βάνασου θεάματος βρέθηκαν το Σάββατο οι κάτοικοι του **Μεσολογγίου**, όταν εντόπισαν ένα αδέσποτο σκύλο, από τον οποίο είχαν αφαιρέσει τα... μάτια.

Το άτυχο τετράποδο εντοπίστηκε **νεκρό** από κατοίκους της περιοχής, οι οποίοι ζητούν – σύμφωνα με την ιστοσελίδα «agrinosite.gr» - τον εντοπισμό και τη σύλληψη του «δολοφόνου και βασανιστή».

Figure 2: Qualitative analysis, Case 2

This case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns cruelty to animals, a severe crime in the western world. Such cases of misinformation create social anger and reactions, even hatred for social groups and regions.

Case 3

This allegation was aired by Star Channel, a major Greek TV outlet, and published on the TV station's news website.

“An Algerian jihadist who fought in Syria has posted a creepy message on the internet urging acts of indiscriminate violence following the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the main news bulletin of “Star”, tv channel this man has been in Athens for a few days now, a fact that causes intense concern”.

Στην Αθήνα Τζιχαντιστής: Το ανατριχιαστικό μήνυμα που προτρέπει σε βία

Θρηνεί τον θάνατο του αρχηγού του ISIS

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▲ Δείτε το βίντεο από το κεντρικό δελτίο ειδήσεων του Star

Αλγερινός Τζιχαντιστής που πολέμησε στη Συρία, ανέβασε στο διαδίκτυο ένα ανατριχιαστικό μήνυμα με το οποίο προτρέπει σε πράξεις τυφλής βίας, μετά το θάνατο του αρχηγού του ISIS.

Σύμφωνα με το κεντρικό δελτίο ειδήσεων του Star και τον δημοσιογράφο Βάδιο Σύρρο, αυτός ο άνδρας εδώ και λίγες μέρες βρίσκεται στην Αθήνα, γεγονός που προκαλεί έντονη ανησυχία.

Figure 3: Qualitative analysis, Case 3

This confirmed fake news case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns terrorism, social peace, and stability. Such cases of misinformation can alter the audiences' perception of reality and cause hatred, violence, provocations, and counter-reactions.

Case 4

This non-true story was published by Proto Thema news website the first in circulation Greek weekly newspaper and one of the most popular news media websites in Greece.

“M.D. Tatiana Maliaga created a biological dietary supplement from hazelnut with the active ingredient “taxol” and proved to be effective in treating superficial and invasive bladder cancer”

The screenshot shows a news article on the Proto Thema website. The main headline reads: "Η γιατρός Τατιάνα Μάλιαγκα δημιούργησε από τη φουντουκιά ένα βιολογικό συμπλήρωμα διατροφής με δραστικό συστατικό την ταξόλη και απέδειξε ότι είναι αποτελεσματικό στην θεραπεία του επιφανειακού και διηθητικού καρκίνου της ουροδόχου κύστης!". The article text discusses the benefits of hazelnut and the effectiveness of the supplement. On the right side, there is a "Thema Insights" sidebar with three items: a link to "«COSMOTE Digital Marketing4U» - Ένας ειδικός, στην υπηρεσία της επιχείρησής σου", an article titled "myblu™: Η Διαφορετική επιλογή για τους ενήλικες καπνιστές", and a tip "Stay on top: Το Digital Workplace κρατά την επιχείρησή σας στην κορυφή!".

Figure 4: Qualitative analysis, Case 4

This confirmed fake news case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered. It concerns pseudoscience and misinformation on critical health issues such as cancer. Such cases of misinformation can lead desperate patients and their families to non-approved, ineffective, and harmful treatments with lethal outcomes.

Discussion

Fake News in the public sphere seems to be a significant threat to democracy and society. Altered truth and misinformation can have severe perpetual consequences in societies. Journalism and its "God terms" (Zelizer, 2004) seem ineffective to keep their fundamental gatekeeping role. Fake news and misinformation are present also in the Greek public sphere and very few researches have been conducted concerning Greek mediascape.

Beyond any doubt, we can claim that the percentage of non-true stories detected in portals/blogs is much higher than those detected in traditional media websites such as newspaper websites and TV station websites.

Traditional media seem to retain their credibility in comparison to portals and blogs according to the findings of the study. Nevertheless, the comparison might be deceiving. Through qualitative case analysis, we highlighted severe cases of misinformation (though much fewer) in professional traditional media mostly on hard news (Foreign Policy, Pseudoscience on Health, Terrorism). "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform, based partly on crowdsourcing strategies, seems to be effective in detecting fake news of all kinds even in the most prominent and respected media outlets.

Thus, although professional media seem to retain their trustworthiness in comparison to new media, portals, and blogs, fake news seems to have penetrated professional journalism significantly. This fact may raise questions for different ways of monitoring news and its credibility and accuracy.

Journalism needs professionalism but the participation of the society and the crowd defending truth and democracy seems also important.

Conclusion

Non-true stories and fake news are clearly present in Greek news websites and in the Greek public sphere. This can be proved definitely by this research. During a period of three months, (October to December 2019) the Facebook-approved fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" confirmed 533 cases of all kinds, a quite impressive number of non-true stories and fake news diffused in the Greek public sphere. This study confirms the findings of Patrona (2018) "in Greece there has always been misleading information, false facts, and fake news in the media" and the findings of Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) "media in Greece presented fake news with misleading information in order either to promote a specific political propaganda or to gain money[...] analyzing the discourse of the most prominent Greek media, popular Greek online newspapers, such as tanea.gr and enet.gr, made use of sentimental propagandistic methods and they generated misleading and fake news".

Finding fake news cases on the Greek internet is something to be expected.

As mentioned clearly in the discussion section, although the percentage of fake news displayed in the traditional "professional" media outlets websites is minor there are severe cases of misinformation even to the most prominent and professional media outlets news websites (Case 1, Case 2, Case 3, Case 4). Especially Case 1, confirms Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) findings as "tanea.gr", one of the most historic and prominent news outlets in Greece, is also mentioned as a fake-news provider in their research. This result makes us skeptical about the reliability and trustworthiness of professional journalism and traditional news outlets even the largest and prominent ones.

Concluding, gatekeeping one of the key-roles of professional traditional journalism, is a procedure that perhaps might not continue to solely rely on professional journalists. The NGO model (Humprecht, 2019) fact-checkers who do not belong to media and fact-checking platforms of alternative strategy (such as crowdsourcing), may play a decisive role in the war against misinformation in the future.

Limitations and Future Possibilities

The first limitation is that the study concerns only Greece. Thus, the generalization of results is limited. The second limitation is that the fake news cases and data were collected only from the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform. Future research can include Europe and countries of North America and Asia. Enlarging the scale will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in different countries and societies. Furthermore, other models of fact-checking and fake news fighting strategies can be used as a research reference.

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